

# PUTTING THE FUN BACK INTO FLUENCY INSTRUCTION

Mary Ann Cahill ■ Anne E. Gregory

As we look around at the students in Mrs. Victoria's (pseudonym) second-grade classroom in Idaho, we see a flurry of activity at each table group. One pair is rolling dice and using different voices to read; a small group is reading to small, plastic animals on their desks; three students are wearing masks while reading; and another pair is using little, red-beamed flashlights to shine on each word as they read. Frustrated with timed reading drills to practice fluency, Mrs. Victoria created fun fluency kits (see Figure 1), a motivating and engaging way to practice repeated reading.

Two weeks earlier, the students sat in front of Mrs. Victoria as she led them in an exercise in creating a student-friendly definition of *fluency*. She presented a well-loved poem on the document camera and asked the students to listen carefully as she read the poem, instructing them to critique her reading according to what sounded right and what did not. She read the poem very quickly, then with no expression, then very slowly, and then laboriously, sounding out each of the words. After each reading, she recorded on the board what the students had noticed about her reading. After reading the poem several times, she called the students' attention to the notes she had recorded on the board. She asked the students to talk to their elbow partners and see if they could come up with a good definition of what fluency was based on these notes. Toward the end of the period, Mrs. Victoria asked

Figure 1 Fun Fluency Kit



Note. Photograph by Mary Ann Cahill, Anne E. Gregory, and Cristianne Lane.

the students to write down their partner definitions, and collected them.

The next day, Mrs. Victoria called the students up to the carpet again and reviewed the student-created definitions of *fluency*. She wrote several of them on the board and asked the students to choose the best aspects of each. Finally, the class created one definition of *fluency* that they believed encompassed all

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the important aspects: “Fluency is reading like you talk, not too fast and not too slow, with expression and no sounding out. It’s also important to understand what you read.” This activity helped the students understand that fluency is more than just speed reading.

Mrs. Victoria decided to spend some time on this activity after pulling several students aside and asking them to define *fluency*. She was distressed to find that many of the students defined it as “reading as fast as you can” or “that’s when a parent helper takes you out into the hall with a stopwatch.” In the state of Idaho, reading progress is measured by using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (Good & Kaminski, 2002) or the AIMSweb fluency measures, and because of this, a pervasive focus on reading rate has been privileged over prosody and comprehension. Mrs. Victoria believes that scaffolding her students’ development and understanding of a well-rounded definition of *fluency*, including expression, intonation, rate, and comprehension, will help them develop more comprehensive fluency skills in their reading.

Toward this end, she has also revamped the fluency practice in her classroom. Based on Rasinski’s (2003) model for fluency practice in combination with Pearson and Gallagher’s (1983) model for comprehension

instruction, Mrs. Victoria follows three simple ideas when presenting fluency instruction:

1. Model fluency—Students benefit from solid models of what is meant by reading fluency—that is, to read with appropriate accuracy, rate, and meaningful expression. Mrs. Victoria makes a point of reading to her students daily and taking time to chat with them explicitly about how she uses expression and appropriate speed while reading. Because she believes that modeling is extremely important, Mrs. Victoria holds a fluency training session for her parent volunteers, clearly demonstrating what good modeling looks like. Following this session, she requests the parent helpers to take a moment to read the practice passages aloud for the students as models before having the students read themselves. This provides the students with an opportunity to discuss the quality of the fluency they heard and examine unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts in the passage (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Rasinski, 2003)

2. Assist reading (guided practice)—In addition to modeling appropriate fluency, Mrs. Victoria and her fluency volunteers assist the students whenever they stumble through a passage. If a mistake is not corrected, the student is destined to repeat it. Developing readers increase their reading fluency when they are provided prompt assistance by a more capable and more fluent reader who reads with them (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Rasinski, 2003). This scaffolding and shared responsibility is essential and may consist of paired reading (Topping, 1995), echo reading (i.e., the teacher reads a single sentence or phrase at a time and the student echoes it; Rasinski, 2003), or choral reading. The combination of seeing the words while hearing them pronounced leads developing readers to

improved and more expressive recognition of the words in text.

3. Practice repeated reading—Repeated readings have been shown to be the most effective practice for developing fluency (Callella, 2003; Dowhower, 1994; Samuels, 1979). Mrs. Victoria has learned, however, that simply giving a student a second-grade leveled text to practice because the students are in second grade is not appropriate. Using running records to identify proper levels allows her to have students practice reading suitable leveled text. She supplements her regular reading program with leveled texts from the Reading A–Z website ([www.readinga-z.com](http://www.readinga-z.com)) and science leveled readers that are engaging and match the comprehension and decoding skills being taught in her reading program.

Repeated readings should be provided for students at their independent reading level (at least 95% word accuracy) if they will be practicing the reading alone. At this level, students can practice speed and expression rather than decoding. Providing passages for the students to practice at their frustration level (less than 90% word accuracy) will, quite simply, make fluent reading unattainable (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). Interesting, research shows that as students engage in repeated readings, they not only improve their ability to read the text practiced but also, more important, demonstrate improvement in overall reading achievement (Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003; Stahl & Kuhn, 2002).

## Putting the Fun Back Into Fluency Instruction

The problem with repeated reading in the classroom is that it can be dull and lifeless, leading students to avoid the practice. Mrs. Victoria found this to

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be the case when she asked students to reread passages as fluency practice, so she decided to find a way to make repeated readings fun and meaningful. She found that the best motivator was repeated reading for performance, even if the performance was simply reading to a buddy. This provided an authentic reason for reading practice (Rasinski, 2003). The most authentic use of repeated readings occurs when students are asked to practice reading texts that will eventually be performed for others (Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998). Appropriate texts include the following:

- Leveled readers and decodable books
- Favorite passages from a story
- Readers Theatre scripts
- Monologues and dialogues
- Poetry and rhymes
- Song lyrics
- Speeches and notable quotations
- Jokes and riddles

(See Table for suggested websites.)

Readers Theatre scripts are widely available on the Internet. Students are also motivated by choosing their own

favorite poem from poetry books or anthologies. Practicing poetry develops oral fluency and allows students to focus their attention on the rhythm and flow of language. Teacher coaching and formative feedback is a critical part of these activities, and it is imperative to help students shape their reading to the appropriate and desired level of meaningful expression (Rasinski, Homan, & Biggs, 2009). Again, these texts should be appropriately leveled for each student.

To make fluency practice engaging and motivating, Mrs. Victoria has created fun fluency kits. Each kit contains a variety of items designed to facilitate fluency practice. A typical kit contains the following:

- Two dice
- A blow-up or plastic microphone
- Animal face masks made out of foam paper or cardboard
- Laminated multidimensional fluency scales
- An egg timer
- Sticky flags
- Small, plastic animals
- A small key chain flashlight with a red beam

For each of the following activities, the teacher can place the emphasis or instructional focus on decoding patterns, comprehension, punctuation, expression, reading rate, and so forth:

1. **Dice**—Before fluency practice begins, Mrs. Victoria asks the students to think of different voices that a person could use while reading, which she writes on the board as a numbered list. In her classroom, no more than six voices are allowed in order to correspond with the numbers on one die, but two dice can be used if students come up with more than six voices. Often, students will choose

voices such as cowboy, baby, Donald Duck, British, deep, and whisper.

Following the creation of the list, the students choose their fluency passages, and one student rolls the die. The number on the die indicates the voice in the list that the student must use to read his or her selected passage aloud. The students take turns rolling the die and reading aloud. This is an excellent motivator to repeatedly read the same passage while alternating voice.

As an alternative, the students can choose six different positions for reading, such as under the desk, while standing, while touching your nose, and sitting backward.

2. **Microphone**—For this activity, the students work in pairs: one as an announcer and one as an interviewer. After practicing the text three times, the announcer reads his or her chosen passage aloud as though it was being read on the radio (see Figure 2). When finished, the interviewer asks the announcer two comprehension questions about the passage.

3. **Animal face masks**—The students wear different face masks and practice reading the passage aloud while adopting the persona of the animal (see Figure 3).

4. **Fluency scales**—The students work in partners to time and assess each other, using either the multidimensional fluency scale (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991) or self-created fluency scales (see Figures 4 and 5).

5. **Sticky flags**—In pairs, one student reads a self-selected passage aloud at a conversational pace, and his or her partner stops the reading when one minute has elapsed, using a one-minute egg timer or a watch. The reader then places a sticky flag to the right of the last word read at the one-minute mark and retells the major events of the passage to his

**Table Suggested Websites**

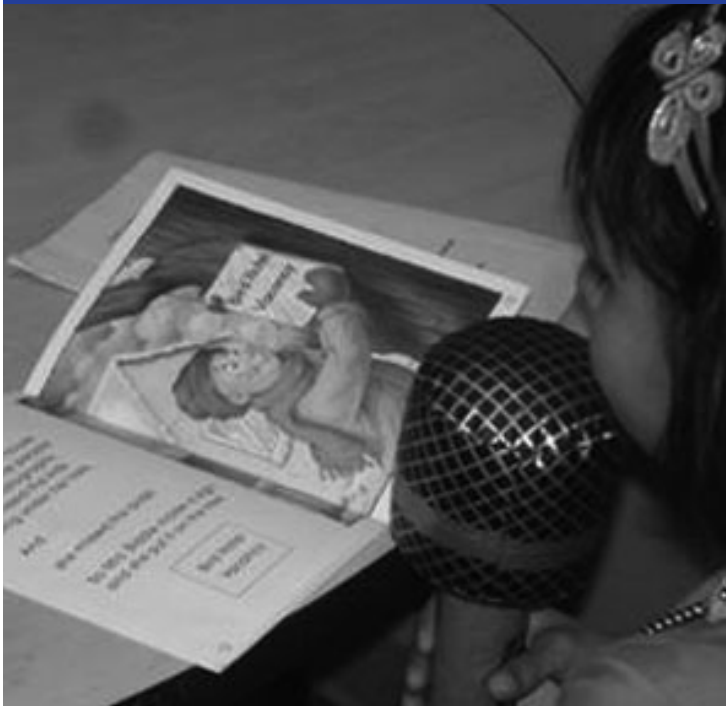
### *Leveled reading passages*

- FreeReading: [www.free-reading.net](http://www.free-reading.net)
- Reading A–Z: [www.readinga-z.com](http://www.readinga-z.com) (requires subscription)
- Regional Technical Assistance Center: [www.sbceo.k12.ca.us/~rtac/Levelpassages.html](http://www.sbceo.k12.ca.us/~rtac/Levelpassages.html)

### *Readers Theatre scripts*

- Author Online! Aaron Shepard: [www.aaronshp.com/rt/RTE.html](http://www.aaronshp.com/rt/RTE.html)
- Reading A–Z: [www.readinga-z.com](http://www.readinga-z.com) (requires subscription)
- Reading Lady: [www.readinglady.com](http://www.readinglady.com)
- Teaching Heart: [www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm](http://www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm)

Figure 2 Broadcasting Using a Microphone



Note. Photograph by Mary Ann Cahill, Anne E. Gregory, and Cristianne Lane.

Figure 3 The Dinosaur Reads



Note. Photograph by Mary Ann Cahill, Anne E. Gregory, and Cristianne Lane.

Figure 4 Multidimensional Fluency Scale

Use the following scales to rate reader fluency on the dimensions of expression and volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace. Scores range from 4 to 16. Generally, scores below 8 indicate that fluency may be a concern. Scores of 8 or above indicate that the student is making good progress in fluency.

Dimension	1	2	3	4
<b>A. Expression and Volume</b>	Reads with little expression or enthusiasm in voice. Reads words as if simply to get them out. Little sense of trying to make text sound like natural language. Tends to read in a quiet voice.	Some expression. Begins to use voice to make text sound like natural language in some areas of the text, but not others. Focus remains largely on saying the words. Still reads in a quiet voice.	Sounds like natural language throughout the better part of the passage. Occasionally slips into expressionless reading. Voice volume is generally appropriate throughout the text.	Reads with good expression and enthusiasm throughout the text. Sounds like natural language. The reader is able to vary expression and volume to match his/her interpretation of the passage.
<b>B. Phrasing</b>	Monotonic with little sense of phrase boundaries, frequent word-by-word reading.	Frequent two- and three-word phrases giving the impression of choppy reading; improper stress and intonation that fail to mark ends of sentences and clauses.	Mixture of run-ons, mid-sentence pauses for breath, and possibly some choppiness; reasonable stress/intonation.	Generally well phrased, mostly in clause and sentence units, with adequate attention to expression.
<b>C. Smoothness</b>	Frequent extended pauses, hesitations, false starts, sound-outs, repetitions, and/or multiple attempts.	Several "rough spots" in text where extended pauses, hesitations, etc., are more frequent and disruptive.	Occasional breaks in smoothness caused by difficulties with specific words and/or structures.	Generally smooth reading with some breaks, but word and structure difficulties are resolved quickly, usually through self-correction.
<b>D. Pace (during sections of minimal disruption)</b>	Slow and laborious.	Moderately slow.	Uneven mixture of fast and slow reading.	Consistently conversational.

Note. Reprinted from *Assessing Reading Fluency*, by T.V. Rasinski, n.d., Honolulu, HI: Pacific Resources for Education and Learning. Copyright by Pacific Resources for Education and Learning.



**Figure 5** Example of a Student-Created Fluency Scale

*Feedback Checklist for Partner Fluency Work*

The reader's voice changed tone.

1	2	3	4	5
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The reader gave different voices to different characters.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

The reader's pace was appropriate.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

The reader's volume was appropriate.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

The reader made the story fun to listen to.

1	2	3	4	5
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or her partner. The two partners then switch roles, with the partner now reading his or her self-selected passage aloud. Next, they each take another turn, each rereading his or her own passage and placing another sticky flag to the right of the last word read at the one-minute mark. The students then note whether they increased their reading rates by passing their first flags.

6. Small, plastic animals—Each student places a plastic animal on his or her desk or on top of the book page and whisper reads aloud as though he or she is reading to the animal (see Figure 6).

7. Small key chain flashlight—The students flash the red-beamed light as they whisper read to themselves, often chasing the light with their reading.

Mrs. Victoria has found that the fun fluency kits allow students to choose engaging and motivating fluency activities that encourage repeated reading. Her students no longer respond with drudgery when asked to practice fluency; in fact, it has now become one of their favorite activities during reading workshop. It is music to her ears when she walks by a pair of students and hears,

**Figure 6** Reading to an Animal



Note. Photograph by Mary Ann Cahill, Anne E. Gregory, and Cristianne Lane.

"Oh, that was great expression!" or "That was a little fast. Remember to read like you talk." More important, when it is time for reading centers, the students now clamor to go to the fluency center, indicating that fluency practice is now a preferred activity in this classroom.

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans

- "Poetry: A Feast to Form Fluent Readers" by Sheila K. Seitz
- "Using Greeting Cards to Motivate Students and Enhance Literacy Skills" by Tara Barnstead
- "Vocabulary With Franklin: Helping Students Become Word Wizards" by Candice Wells

### IRA Books

- *Creating Strategic Readers: Techniques for Developing Competency in Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension* (2nd ed.) by Valerie Ellery
- *Fun-tastic Activities for Differentiating Comprehension Instruction, Grades 2–6* by Sandra K. Athans and Denise Ashe Devine

### IRA Journal Articles

- "Implementing Readers Theatre as an Approach to Classroom Fluency Instruction" by Chase Young and Timothy Rasinski, *The Reading Teacher*, September 2009
- "Laughing Through Rereadings: Using Joke Books to Build Fluency" by Molly Ness, *The Reading Teacher*, May 2009
- "Repeated Reading of Poetry Can Enhance Reading Fluency" by Sherri Faver, *The Reading Teacher*, December 2008

### Even More!

- "Rasinski on Reading Fluency" (IRA Insights podcast): [www.reading.org/General/Publications/Podcasts.aspx](http://www.reading.org/General/Publications/Podcasts.aspx)